

# “Face-Work Night”: Representations of Self and Other(s) in the Presidential Concession Speech

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## 1 Introduction

A comparison between rhetoric, the most ancient discipline centered on language use, and pragmatics, one of the late-xx-century developments of linguistic research, evidently points to similarities concerning some macroscopic characters of the two fields of study and extending to single concepts and minute aspects, thus making it possible to draw parallels between their objects, approaches and components. In very general terms, it is easy to recognize that both disciplines conceive language as a form of action and therefore focus on language use, include context in their analyses and give special attention to the role of the interlocutors. Moreover, they are both concerned with effective communication, do not rely on deterministic reasoning nor on truth-values, but operate in the realm of non-necessary truth and inferences (Caffi 2001: 148). According to Venier (2008), a comparison between the two disciplines should focus on the fundamental elements involved in communication: in rhetoric terms, the notions of arguer, discourse, and audience. This approach brings forth a crucial difference: while pragmatics is centered on the intentions of the speaker and illocutionary forces, rhetoric is interested in the effects of language utterances and emphasizes perlocution (Venier 2008: 95). This contraposition offers an interesting background to the analysis of specific concepts occurring in different but similar guises in both pragmatics and rhetoric. In this respect, genre, belonging to both disciplines but displaying varying characters across them, is probably the most evident and the most frequently investigated notion. Interesting correspondences also emerge from the connections between *ethos* and *face*.

In the framework of the correspondences between pragmatics and rhetoric, this paper sets out to explore the notion of *ethos* beyond its rhetorical function, from a linguistic and pragmatic viewpoint, comparing it to the pragmatic concept of *face* (section 2). To investigate the ubiquitous presence of *ethos* in discourse and its connections with pragmatic *facework* within actual cultural constraints, the analysis will focus on a genre typical of political communica-

tion in the US, the Concession Speech (CS), which occurs in a strongly institutionalized context and displays evident ritual components (section 3). As a case study, the Concession Speech by John McCain will be analyzed, pointing to the processes of image-construction involving, beside the Self, both the Audience (the supporters) and the Enemy (the winning adversary and his supporters), and comparing them with the strategies adopted in the corresponding Victory Speech (VS) by Barak Obama (section 4). In the conclusions (section 5), the recurring patterns of the genre will be summarized and discussed, with a view to emphasizing the role of the ethotic component as the rhetoric counterpart of pragmatic *facework*.

## 2 Ethos and *Face*

*Face*, in the original definition by Goffman (1967: 5) ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims of himself’ or ‘an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes’, can be assumed as a cross-cultural principle, independent of specific social and cultural norms. In Goffman’s formulation, *face* belongs to a general “ritual” order, and its importance for human beings and their interaction is a sort of anthropological prerequisite to communication. In this perspective, politeness acquires a universal value insofar as it refers to verbal strategies aiming at satisfying the general principles stemming from ‘*face-wants*’ and consequent *facework*. As is well known, the notion of *face* (and its alleged universal value) has been widely exploited in politeness, and further discussed from different points of view. A major strand of criticism has characterized the work of Eastern researchers, who have emphasized the special features of Chinese politeness and of the Chinese concept of *face* (Gu 1990). In particular, it has been noted that the famous definition of *face* as ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61) characterizes *face* ‘as an image that intrinsically belongs to the individual’, while for Goffman ‘face is a ‘public property’ that is only assigned to individuals contingent upon their interactional behaviour’ (Mao 1994: 454). In this respect, Western politeness theory is thought to have emphasized an individualistic approach, with an important methodological consequence: ‘such a self-oriented characterization of face, which may very well underlie Western interactional dynamics, can be problematic in a non-Western context’ (Mao 1994: 455). Actually, this sort of criticism is not confined to Chinese researchers. Held (2021) has systematically examined the different approaches to *face* as a socio-pragmatic concept, focusing on the revision of Brown’s and Levinson’s paradigm of politeness. Held recognizes a line of evol-

ution in the interpretation of the concept of *face*, which is in tune with the development of the interactional, discursive and cognitive approaches to pragmatics itself (s. also the *Introduction* to this volume). In this respect, special attention deserves the notion of *face* ‘as an image which is discursively negotiated’ (Locher 2006: 251), which quite naturally leads to the idea of the interactive construction of *face*. In the *Face-Construction Theory*, face is not a *property* nor a *want*. Rather, it can be conceived as a set of “characteristics, conditions or states evinced in the relationship that the partners achieve interactionally” (Arundale 2006: 203). In other words, *face* is ‘conjointly co-constructed’ (Arundale 2010: 2078). The discursive (and interactional) interpretation of *face* entails a further consequence: as a discursive phenomenon, *face* ‘is constituted in interaction, but it is also constitutive of interaction’ (Haugh 2009: 12).

In the Aristotelian rhetoric, *ethos* is one of the three kinds of persuasion—the one which depends on the character of the speaker (Rh. 1356 a). It is also the strongest argument, as it is able to generate trust: trustworthy speakers can exploit their *ethos* to obtain persuasion. Trust, however, is generated in discourse and the adhesion of the listener is obtained through discourse—not through previous opinions about the speaker. In Aristotle’s words: trust ‘should come about through the speech, however, not through prior belief that the speaker is of a certain quality’ (Rh. 1356 a, 9–10). Though the Aristotelian interpretation of *ethos* is not a constant in the ancient rhetorical tradition,<sup>1</sup> it has largely influenced the modern approach to persuasion, especially in a discourse analytical perspective. Actually, *ethos* has been studied both from the argumentative point of view, with a special attention for fallacies (as, for example, in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004 or in Walton et al. 2008), and within the discursive framework, integrating rhetoric with pragmatics and sociology. Research in the latter perspective has been particularly fruitful in the French area, where scholars have drawn on the linguistics of enunciation (from Benveniste onwards) on the one side, and, on the other, on the sociological tradition of Bourdieu.

An effective summary of the different positions, corresponding to different theoretical frameworks, is offered by Amossy (2001), who examines the sociologist’s approach, where the power of words derives from the social status and function of the speaker, and the linguistic/pragmatic viewpoint, which

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1 For a comparison between the Greek (Aristotelian) and the Roman approach to the question of *ethos*, s. for example Žmavc (2012).

looks for the efficacy of speech inside verbal exchanges. In this respect, Ducrot’s definition of *ethos* as a discursive phenomenon is a well-known and fundamental tenet:

Dans ma terminologie, je dirai que l’*ethos* est attaché à L, le locuteur en tant que tel: c’est en tant qu’il est source de l’énonciation qu’il se voit affublé de certains caractères qui, par contrecoup, rendent cette énonciation acceptable ou rebutante. Ce que l’orateur pourrait dire de lui, en tant qu’objet de l’énonciation, concerne en revanche l’être du monde, et ce n’est pas celui-ci qui est en jeu dans la partie de la rhétorique dont je parle (1984: 201).

The emphasis on *discursive* *ethos* also emerges in its contraposition to *pre-discursive* *ethos*, developed by Maingueneau (1999, 2016). For Maingueneau, the presentation of the self is socially constrained, as it is conditioned by the scene of the enunciation (*la scène d’énonciation*), which in turn comprises three dimensions: the *global* scene, corresponding to the domain of discourse; the *generic* scene, concerning the genre and thus subordinated to the global scene; the *scenography*, which is actively and freely constructed by the speaker. Though deeply influenced by this context, the image of the self is not the mere result of the rules imposed by the three layers of the enunciation scene, but is actively (and discursively) constructed by the speaker within contextual constraints.

The apparent contradiction between the sociologist’s *ethos*, ‘inscribed in a symbolic exchange governed by social mechanisms and external institutional positions’ (Amossy 2001: 5), and the linguist’s discursive *ethos* is resolved by Amossy in the rhetoric perspective, where these two approaches can be complementary rather than conflictual. This reconciliation is possible in the framework of Perelman’s notion of the audience as a thought-construction of the arguer, which entails the selection of preliminary objects of agreement to be shared between arguer and audience (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958). Parallel to the construction of argumentation proper, which develops from (accepted) premises to conclusions, the arguer ‘builds an *ethos* on collective representations endowed with positive value’ (Amossy 2001: 6). Discursive *ethos* can be conceived as a situated re-elaboration of pre-discursive assumptions concerning both the character of arguers and if and to which extent their representations are accepted by a given audience. *Ethos* is the result of a series of mirror reflections, involving arguer and audience, which also exploit shared stereotypes, models and values.

The emphasis on the interactional quality of both *face* and *ethos* characterizing recent pragmatic research is a good argument in favor of a comparison

between the two notions, which has led to consider (and partially overlap) them within the same analytical framework (as is the case in Venier 2008). *Ethos may be considered the rhetorical counterpart of face*. If rhetoric, being concerned with persuasive discourse, belongs to pragmatics, *ethos* is *face* in the service of persuasion. It is not mainly concerned with defending one's own needs but is projected to enhance a self-image in tune with the image of the audience, and possibly in opposition to contending images of Other(s). When compared to *face*, the limits of *ethos* seem to lie in its argumentative nature, as it originates in connection with a process of persuasion. Yet *ethos* is ubiquitous in discourse, possibly because persuasion itself is inherent to any communicative exchange.

This approach to *ethos* obviously requires an interpretation of rhetorical discourse, nowadays widely accepted among discourse analysts, extending beyond the realm of explicit and intentional persuasion typical of certain domains or genres. With specific reference to the argumentative component of persuasion, Amossy has repeatedly explored this aspect, recognizing the pervasiveness of persuasion on the one hand, but emphasizing, on the other, the need for a fine-grained analysis to distinguish between its explicit and implicit forms ('il faut dans cette optique différencier la dimension argumentative de la visée argumentative' [2005]). Even if Amossy's conviction that *any* utterance has an argumentative component may appear far-fetched, the interpersonal character of discourse necessarily leads to consider the importance of the respective positioning of the interlocutors, which implies at least a promotion of one's own image (and viewpoints). In this respect, the ethotic component of discourse is both evident and ineliminable.

A further point deserves comment, namely the constitutively interactional nature of discourse. In a definition of discourse dating back long before the actual development of discourse studies, Benveniste emphasized the interactional and persuasive nature of discourse: 'Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way' (Benveniste 1959/1971: 209). This approach has been highly influential, especially in the French linguistic research—and in the *Analyse du Discours*. It is a direct consequence of the theory of enunciation, which has become one of the pivotal analytical tools in discourse studies. In this respect, a fundamental aspect of enunciation has to be stressed: the elimination of linguistic markers of enunciation in the utterance does not imply the elimination of all enunciative responsibility. Although third-person structures ("non-person" in Benveniste's terminology), passives and impersonals generate forms of *débayage*, giving the impression that 'facts speak for themselves', subjectivity cannot be fully erased from language use, and it is 'the condition of intersubjectivity, which alone

makes linguistic communication possible’ (Benveniste 1958/1971: 230). From the point of view of ethos, first-person markers are not indispensable to construct the representation of the enunciator. Whenever there seems to be no necessity of self-representation and assumption of enunciative responsibility (as is the case in factual reports or in the discourse of science), ethos generates itself, exactly to fill the void of ethos. Ethos is therefore present also outside the context of *actual* exchange, as intersubjectivity is part of all form of language use.

This view of discourse justifies a further interpretation of the parallel between *ethos* and *face*, put forth by Antelmi (2011) in the framework of a systematic investigation of the two notions within the paradigm of politeness. According to Antelmi, ethos has a wider scope than *face*, as it is not limited to actual interpersonal exchanges, but concerns any type of text—dialogic and monologic, oral and written. As a consequence, it can be a more effective and comprehensive notion to describe and evaluate politeness practices in discourse. The pervasiveness of ethos makes it superordinate to *face*, which seems to be activated only in actual interpersonal forms of communication. Thus, the relationship between pragmatics and rhetoric can be reversed: the latter is no longer included in the former as exclusively concerned with persuasion but can claim an even wider scope of application.

Beyond general considerations concerning the relationship between rhetoric and pragmatics, in a discursive perspective ethos *is* a constant in discourse. Given the interactional nature of *all* verbal action, discourse as a social practice entails ethotic needs. Moreover, ethos is always ethos for someone: the construction and representation of the self (or of any enunciative instance) is intended for a given audience, implies the co-enunciator, and is processed reversibly both in the production and the reception of discourse. Auchlin (2000: 76) describes it as a ‘hologramme expérientiel’.

As part of discourse, ethos is subject to the constraints that govern its manifestation in a given context, and is therefore developed in compliance with cultural and generic norms. As a universal component which is realized in different forms according to the nature and character of specific social practices, ethos as a rhetorical re-interpretation of the concept of *face* can mediate between global vs local approaches to politeness issues.<sup>2</sup> The nature of its

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2 According to Antelmi (2011), the theoretical problems connected with the alleged universal value of politeness can be ultimately tackled in the perspective of a rhetorical re-interpretation of the concept of *face*, assigning to pragmatics the concern for time/space-dependent choices and to rhetoric the formulation of context-independent principles, which in turn give rise to different interactional styles, resulting from different forms of social cat-

linguistic representation—the counterpart of the verbal face of *face* (Tracy 1990)—is especially evident in ritual forms of discourse linked to institutional or strongly culture-bound contexts or genres. Interesting examples of ethotic strategies in line with the previous observations can be found in the US Presidential Concession Speech, which will be investigated as a genre, with specific reference to the representation of ethos and related *facework*.

### 3 The Presidential Concession Speech

#### 3.1 *Concession Speech an Institutionalized Genre of US Political Discourse*

A Concession Speech (henceforth CS) is delivered by a defeated presidential candidate to acknowledge the victory of the adversary, thus implicitly starting the process of transfer of power to the next administration.<sup>3</sup> There is no constitutional provision for the losing candidate to concede, yet it has become a ritual, normally preceding the announcement of the victory by the winner. The first public concession of a losing candidate dates back to November 5th, 1896, when William Jennings Bryan sent a short telegram to President Elect McKinley:

“Senator Jones has just informed me that the returns indicate your election, and I hasten to extend my congratulations. We have submitted the issue to the American people and their will is law”.<sup>4</sup>

It can be considered an act of courtesy, which however displays at least two important elements that would characterize concession in the following years: congratulations, which transform the admission of a defeat into the celebration of a victory, and respect for the will of the electorate, which corresponds to the valorization of the US democratic system (a theme which would become more and more important in the years to come). With the passing of time, the direct form of concession to the adversary has become a public announcement, with a markedly ceremonial component. The first radio concession was broadcast in 1928 by Al Smith, while in 1952 Stevenson conceded to Eisenhower on live television.

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egorization, habits and aims typical of a given culture, but still maintaining a universal dimension (Antelmi 2011: 89).

3 Obviously, when the winner is the Incumbent President, there will be no actual transfer of power, but the extension of the present administration. This is however a form of “transition”, from the suspense of the pre-election period to the certainty of a second term.

4 All quotations from CSS are taken from the texts published on the website of the American Presidency Project. The website at UC Santa Barbara offers precious information about

The American Presidency Project devotes a section to Concessions, gathering 39 instances from 1896 to 2016: they are listed as telegram (13), statement (6), radio address (2), address (3) remarks (12), speech (2), news conference (1). The chronological distribution of the different forms of concession is clear-cut: telegrams and statements were the rule before World War II (with the exception of the two radio addresses), while in the post-war period it has become customary to pronounce an address/speech or remarks (which, for the purpose of this brief analysis, can be subsumed under a single generic category). This line of evolution shows that concession started in the form of private communication from losing to winning candidate, which however had a public component, insofar as it had media coverage. The public aspect was brought to the fore by a few candidates, who used the broadcasting media or a news conference to announce their concession. Yet the original direct address to the adversary has not been eliminated, as in most speeches concession is not actually performed before the audience (and the very word *concession* is only exceptionally pronounced), but is *referred* through a piece of narrative: the loser informs the audience that he has congratulated the winning adversary—he may mention a phone call or even read the text of a telegram. The performative act of concession is thus mitigated, narrative functions as a form of hedging.

This presentation choice does not however alter the performative value of a CS, which gives it an (informal but crucial) institutional function, parallel to that of the Inaugural Address (IA)—albeit in a minor key. It can be noted that in a democratic process the CS is even more important than the IA, as it ushers in the acknowledgement of the new president’s authority.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, researchers in both the socio-political and the discursive field have more rarely dwelled on concession.<sup>6</sup> Corcoran (1994) explores the genre considering its pragmatic features as well as its recurring patterns. He singles out three actors in the complex rite of concession: the loser, who converts defeat into honor thanks to his noble behavior; the winner, who recognizes the merits of the adversary in his Victory Speech (henceforth vs); last but not least, the news media, witnesses and at the same time active promoters of a final solution of the electoral contest, ‘a vicarious public chorus’ reminding of Greek tragedy (Corcoran 1994: 114). A further actor must be added to this dramatic performance, namely the sup-

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the history of the Presidency, and includes documents, data, and a media archive ([www.presidency.ucsb.edu](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu)).

- 5 In the light of these observations, the well-known behavior of Donald Trump in 2020 appears in all its anomalous anti-institutional value. This is not, however, the object of this research.
- 6 S., among others, Welch 1999, Osisanwo and Alugbin 2019. As case studies: Ritter and Howell 2001, Willyard and Ritter 2005.



porters, who in many cases represent the physical audience before which both cs and vs are delivered, actively participating to the events. The supporters of the losing candidate show approval and warm support for their leader, but also boo at the winning adversary. Their sadness and resentment is the counterpart to the cheering audience of the winner, who give voice to their unbridled enthusiasm. The President Elect accepts the ovation as an extension and reinforcement of pre-electoral applause. Concession, on the other hand, entails a ritual of reframing the wishes of the loser's audience, channeling the commitment of the supporters into a new course of action.

Coming to the moves that characterize the genre, Corcoran (1994: 115) singles out four main elements: the (performative) acknowledgement of defeat, enacted as a declaration of the adversary's victory; a call to unity (anticipating the President-for-all strategy typical of the IA); the celebration of democracy, whose mechanisms legitimate both victory and defeat; the exhortation to continue the fight (for future victories). These recurring elements are translated into typical moves: sharing of one's own feelings with the audience (self-presentation), expressing congratulation/appreciation for the adversary, thanking supporters/collaborators/family members etc., appealing to reunification (possibly in co-operation with the new president), celebrating the founding values of democracy and of America.

In this context, the construction of the *image* of the participants (the "social self" mentioned in the *Introduction* to this volume) plays a fundamental role. The strategies functional meeting the needs of this ethotic aspect of *face* will be investigated in the following section.

### 3.2 *Ethotic Strategies*

Before delving into the analysis of the single moves, it is worth observing that the general tone dominating concession is *gracious*—this is the concept, and often the adjective, generally used to frame the event in the press.<sup>7</sup> Considering the cs as a single global act, both the attitude of the speaker and the reception of the journalists are highly predictable, though in the details the candidates have shown differences in the organization of their text and in the emphasis given to its various aspects, sometimes introducing further elements (often linked to the context of a specific election).

As the whole mechanism of concession transforms the admission of Self's failure into congratulation for the Other's victory, from a pragmatic point of

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<sup>7</sup> The very use of this adjective evokes the paradigm of politeness, functional to the construction of a positive image of the self and, very frequently, of the winning adversary.

view the speaker pays homage to the adversary, thus performing a *face-flattering act* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992). The *face* of the adversary is thus preserved and even enhanced. This strategy has another important consequence: it avoids forwarding defeat (which is a potentially embarrassing situation) and gives prominence to victory, a concept more in line with US public ethics. As stated by Corcoran, ‘dwelling upon defeat contradicts a basic American commitment to success’ (1994: 109).

Furthermore, from the point of view of ethos, the homage to the former adversary (and the more or less explicit admission of his qualities) marks the conclusion of a war-like contest, with the losing part taking the role of a noble enemy, who despite heroic virtue is forced to capitulation. The war context evolves into a sport competition dominated by sentiments of chivalry and fair play. Retreat does not imply dishonor, what counts is the effort made to participate in a fair competition. Self-representation is the *discursive victory* of the defeated candidate, who shows modesty and respect, sorrow but hope in a better (and united) future. The reframing of the electoral campaign includes a new representation of the winning adversary, often against the will of resentful supporters. The speaker needs to condemn and control their reactions, as shown in the following example:

Let me say that I talked to President Clinton. We had a good visit. And I congratulated him. And I said. No, no, no. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I’ve said repeatedly—I’ve said repeatedly—wait. I’ve said repeatedly—I have said repeatedly in this campaign that the president was *my opponent not my enemy*. And I wish him well.<sup>8</sup>

BOB DOLE 1996

Dole’s words contrast the booing of the audience, a reaction to the mentioning of the winner that is by no means occasional. The recordings of the speeches show this frequently recurring attitude, which in turn gives the speaker the possibility of emphasizing his positive feelings towards the winner—“the man who was my former opponent and will be my president” (McCain 2008).

Calm and brave acceptance of fate do not exclude the expression of bitter feelings: “I can’t stand here tonight and say it doesn’t hurt” (Carter, 1980). Nor is regret excluded: “This is not the outcome we wanted or we worked so hard for” (H. Clinton 2016). Yet the dominant feeling in the narrative of the Self is gratitude, occasionally combined with pride (“I am so proud of that

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<sup>8</sup> As stated above, all quotations are taken from the texts published on the American Presidency Project website. Unless differently stated, emphasis is mine.

choice. So proud of both of them”, Dukakis, 1988, thanking the candidate to the vice-presidency and his wife). The act of thanking is a constant across concessions, and includes different groups and characters: supporters, campaign activists, fellow candidate for the vice-presidency, wife (and children), other family members and friends. Again, a positive act of politeness is performed, and materializes another *dramatis persona*, the audience (or the other *face* of the Other), which is represented as distinct from the Self, as it should not be considered responsible for the failure (“the failure is mine, not yours”, McCain 2008). *I thank you* is ubiquitous and repeatedly used in CS, directly addressing the mentioned characters or simply the audience. Occasionally, however, supporters and friends are represented in conjunction with the speaker, as shown by the use of the inclusive first person plural: “I feel pride and gratitude for this wonderful campaign that *we* have built together” (H. Clinton 2016). Through congratulations and thanks, speakers enact positive attitudes of respect and affection, thus offering a representation of their ethos, *l’ethos montré* (Maingueneau 2002), which is obviously much more effective than self-description (or *ethos dit*).

The *gracious* expression of the Self is complementary to a gallant representation of the Adversary, the former villain who turns into the winning hero and as such deserves respect, loyalty, and sincere encouragement. *I wish him well* is another recurring formula. This in turn further contributes to emphasize the positive qualities of the speaker, through that mirroring effect characterizing the interactional construction of ethos. In the discursive perspective, actual dialogue is not necessary to materialize interaction: ethos pervades monological speeches, without losing its dialogic nature stemming from the enunciative dimension of rhetoric. Dialogicity is evident in concession, as the speech is part of a wider macro-act: the campaign as a whole, and in particular its final section, the Election Night, both climax and turning point of the electoral drama.

The narrative of the contacts occurred between the two candidates, the starting point and vicarious performative core of concession, is usually repeated from the point of view of the winner in the VS, where the President Elect draws a flattering picture of the loser emphasizing the grace of conceding. CS and VS are generally delivered during the same night, VS cannot occur before CS, and the first and foremost effect of concession is to make the proclamation of victory possible. Opposite feelings dominate the two speeches, but they are performed as part of one and the same event: the Election, which is the most important and distinguishing feature of democracy. In both of them, there is constant reference to this contextual background, a discursive landscape where each of the two candidates, both winner and loser, must find their positioning.

While the former can legitimately take the role of Valiant Leader<sup>9</sup> and prospect a brilliant future when the hopes and projects of the campaign are going to turn into reality, the latter must change plans. Although the winner is much more visible worldwide and his words are under close scrutiny both at home and abroad, his task is much easier: the show must simply go on. Losers, on the contrary, are obliged to reshape their self-image, save their (and their supporters’) face, and adjust previous plans. As discussed so far, self-representation emphasizes new virtues, which can transform the defeated candidate into a new type of hero.

There is however another important aspect to consider: defeat should not lead to the end of all form of action, which would make all efforts totally vain. Both values and projects must be preserved as much as possible. In such a difficult situation, there is only one way out: to offer cooperation to the new president. The commitment to reunification anticipates one of the crucial moves of the IA, ‘affirming unity over division’,<sup>10</sup> but stems from a different need, namely that of re-directing the energies of the losing part, offering supporters new goals, balancing loyalty to previous ideals with the possibility of finding a viable compromise in order to preserve them. This is obviously not easy, not even in discourse. Yet the effort of the speaker is to envisage such a possibility—at least. Carter (1980):

This has been a long and hard-fought campaign, as you well know. But we must now come together as *a united and a unified people* to solve the problems that are still before us, to meet the challenges of a new decade. And I urge all of *you to join in with me* in a sincere and fruitful effort to support my successor when he undertakes this great responsibility as President of the greatest nation on Earth.

Nixon (1960):

I have great faith that our people, Republicans, Democrats alike [...] *will unite behind our next president* in seeing that America does meet the challenge which destiny has placed upon us.

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9 For the exploitation of the myth of the Valiant Leader—together with the other fundamental myths of the Conspiratorial Enemy and United-We-Stand (as singled out by Edelman 1971)—in some genres of US presidential rhetoric, s. Santulli (2023).

10 The moves of the IA are described with an argumentative slant in Degano (2022).

Working together with the new administration is a way to continue to work. Some speakers emphasize that continuing the work means continuing the fight *for the people*, their values and their needs. Dukakis (1988):

Most of all, I'll remember the people I've met. Their strength, their values, their generosity, and their hospitality to Kitty and me and to our family. And it is very important *that we continue to fight for them and for families all across America*. [...] That's what we've been fighting for, and that is what *we must continue to work for* every day and every week and every month of our lives.

This approach (which is however not the most frequent) implicitly brings to the fore the divergences between the two parties, so that the words encouraging cooperation sound hollow ("We'll be working with the new administration" in Dukakis' speech is no more than a formula). In some cases, it is impossible to ignore the contraposition, but support to the new president is due despite all differences. H. Clinton (2016):

Last night, I congratulated Donald Trump and *offered to work with him on behalf of our country*. [...] We have seen that our nation is *more deeply divided than we thought*. But I still believe in America and I always will. And if you do, then *we must accept this result* and then look to the future. Donald Trump is going to be our president. We owe him an open mind and the chance to lead.

The call to unity, however, is mostly rooted into the *common* ideals of all Americans. G. Bush (1992):

America must always come first. [...] Now I ask that *we stand behind our new President*. Regardless of our differences, all *Americans share the same purpose*: to make this, the world's greatest nation, more safe and more secure and to guarantee every American a shot at the American dream.

Al Gore (2000):

*This is America*. Just as we fight hard when the stakes are high, *we close ranks and come together when the contest is done*. And while there will be time enough to debate our continuing differences, now is the time to recognize that that *which unites us is greater than that which divides us*. While we yet hold and do not yield our opposing beliefs, there is a

higher duty than the one we owe to political party. This is America and *we put country before party; we will stand together behind our new president.*

Differences that were marked during the pre-electoral fight fade away, become negligible before the common values of all Americans. This aspect is particularly interesting in Al Gore's CS, which was delivered in very special circumstances. As is well known, Gore had conceded to G.W. Bush but then retracted and refused to acknowledge his victory until the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Bush and recognized him as the winner in the state of Florida. Final concession by Gore came on December 13th. In the climate of uncertainty generated by close positions, alleged fraud and legal action, Gore's concession marked reconciliation in the name of a common ideal of rule-governed democracy.

Gore's CS presents some unusual elements, starting from the opening lines. As customary, concession is expressed in the form of congratulations to the winner, but Gore adds a comment linked to the exceptional situation, which humorously mitigates the tension with the aim of making this concession as similar as possible to any previous one:

Just moments ago, I spoke with George W. Bush and congratulated him on becoming the 43rd president of the United States. *And I promised him that I wouldn't call him back this time.* I offered to meet with him as soon as possible so that we can start to *heal the divisions* of the campaign and the contest through which we've just passed.

Yet the speech has a particularly solemn tone. Gore mentions a forerunner of all concessions, dating back well before Bryan's telegram:

Almost a century and a half ago, Senator Stephen Douglas told Abraham Lincoln, who had just defeated him for the presidency, "Partisan feeling must yield to patriotism. I'm with you, Mr. President, and God bless you." Well, in that same spirit, I say to President-elect Bush that what remains of partisan rancor must now be put aside, and may God bless his stewardship of this country.

The reference to Lincoln, one of the icons of US tradition, is functional to reminding the audience of common values, but at the same time gives special dignity to Gore's own image and, above all, to the image of his adversary: the parallel shifts the present contest (and its still unsolved ambiguities) onto

a higher level, beyond any possible doubt. Consequently, the theme of American principles of democracy and unity is developed in the speech with special emphasis, as shown in the first quotation cited above as well as in the following:

We are *one people* with a *shared history* and a *shared destiny*. Indeed, that history gives us many examples of contests as hotly debated, as fiercely fought, with their own challenges to the popular will. Other disputes have dragged on for weeks before reaching resolution. And each time, both the victor and the vanquished *have accepted the result peacefully and in a spirit of reconciliation*.

Gore is actually constructing *the ethos of America*: before the world, the dispute over contended votes jeopardizes the untarnished image of rule-governed democracy Americans claim for their country. Concession finally re-establishes tradition and protects the reputation of the whole country.

Moments of sharp contrast seem to stimulate reference to the founding principles of the nation. Another interesting example, H. Clinton (2016):

Our constitutional democracy enshrines the peaceful transfer of power and we don't just respect that, we cherish it.

Conceding the victory to the adversary is recognizing the victory of democracy. This approach anticipates a discursive element occurring also in the IA, when the new President emphasizes the spirit of the Capitol Hill ceremony, a peaceful transfer of power, which is not the result of waged war but of a democratic process ("The peaceful transfer of authority is rare in history, yet common in our country. With a simple oath, we affirm old traditions and make new beginnings", G.W. Bush 2001).<sup>11</sup>

The examples given so far have shown how the images of the different characters involved in concession are constructed. In the next section, a single CS will be examined in comparison with the corresponding vs. As a case study, the 2008 Election Night has been chosen, with John McCain's and Barak Obama's speeches.

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11 This element can obviously occur only when a challenger wins the presidency, as it would be meaningless when a president is sworn in for a second term, and also when the new President belongs to the same party as his predecessor.

#### 4 McCain vs Obama: a Case Study

In the previous section, the strategies functional to showing the different components of ethos in the CS have been discussed, with examples taken from a choice of texts belonging to the post-war period. The aim of this section is to examine how they are deployed in one single speech, emphasizing on the one hand the interaction between the different characters represented in discourse, and, on the other, exploring correspondences with parallel ethotic strategies exploited in the vs. The analysis focuses on one Election Night, November 4th 2008, when Sen. John McCain delivered his CS in Phoenix, followed by Sen. Barack Obama's vs pronounced in Chicago.<sup>12</sup>

McCain's CS includes all the recurring elements discussed above, with a few interesting variations. It is organized as follows: 1. Report of congratulations to Obama, with special emphasis on the qualities of the President Elect, including comments on the racial issue; 2. Call to unity, despite differences and disappointment; 3. Thanks to supporters, family, campaign comrades; 4. Comments on the campaign and autobiographical notes; 4. Praise of American values.

Obama's vs comprises the following parts: 1. Preamble; 2. Report of McCain's phone call and homage to the loser; 3. Thanks (to Vice-President Elect, family, collaborators, voters); 4. Comments on the campaign; 5. Prospects and commitment to future action; 6. Narrative *digressio* (the history of America seen through the eyes of a 100-year-old black woman); 7. Appeal to unity. Though the vs as a genre allows a wide margin of variation, there are a few moves that constantly occur in the speech (report of concession, thanking the supporters/family/friends etc, relaunching the core themes of the campaign and making plans for the future). They are duly included in Obama's speech, which is however extraordinary focused on unity and on a call to common action, which seems to be addressed to all Americans, beyond party allegiance, thus envisaging the President-for-All myth.<sup>13</sup>

Though including canonical moves and presenting widely exploited themes and motives,<sup>14</sup> both speeches show some interesting deviations from their

12 Both texts are available on the American Presidency Project website, at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-phoenix-conceding-the-2008-presidential-election>, and at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-chicago-accepting-election-the-44th-president-the-united-states>, respectively.

13 For a detailed analysis of Obama's vs, compared to his Presidential Announcement, s. Santulli (2023).

14 For example, both speakers revive the metaphor of the journey, referred to the campaign (McCain, at the very beginning: "My friends we have come to the end of a long journey";



respective generic norms, which have a special significance in relation to the ethos of the various characters singled out above (the speaker, the audience, the adversary, America).

McCain constructs his image both implicitly and explicitly. He describes himself as a *servant* of the country, which he considers a privilege: though mitigated by the expression of gratitude, the representation of the *blessing* of his 50-year career may seem in contrast with the Maxim of Modesty (Leech 1983). Yet it is only a *politic* representation of the Self (Watts 2003). Actually, in compliance with the principles of politeness, McCain performs self-deprecation, openly presenting himself as responsible for the defeat (“the failure is mine”, “I am sure I made my share of them [mistakes]”). This admission contributes to constructing a very positive image: a frank, loyal person, who is able to keep calm and rational also in difficult moments. His discursive actions further reinforce this ethotic representation: he is grateful (and he uses exactly these words to perform his acts of thanking: *I am (deeply/especially/very) grateful/thankful to ...*), respectful (“his [Obama’s] success alone commands my respect”), gallant, and sensitive to the problems of the country. This positive *self*-image is in tune with McCain’s image given in the vs by Obama, former adversary and now President Elect, who resorts to the most typical adjective (*gracious*) to describe his adversary’s concession, and dwells on his merits much more than usual:

I just received a *very gracious call* from Senator McCain. He fought long and hard in this campaign, and he’s fought even longer and harder for the country he loves. He *has endured sacrifices* for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine, and we are better off for the service rendered *by this brave and selfless leader*. I congratulate him and Governor Palin for all they have achieved, and *I look forward to working with them* to renew this nation’s promise in the months ahead.

Obama is accepting the offer for co-operation, which corresponds to his own approach to the celebration of victory as an achievement of the whole country. In Obama’s campaign, the representation of the Enemy was always impersonal (with a wide exploitation of passive and impersonal linguistic structures) and free of animosity. Now the Enemy materializes in a flesh-and-bones man, who however is a *former* adversary, already transformed into a collaborator.

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Obama: “I want to thank my partner in this journey”), while Obama also extends it to describe the future presidency (“The road ahead will be long”).

Obama’s flattering representation of the adversary is the counterpart of McCain’s. Repeatedly stopping the booing of the audience, McCain opens the speech as follows:

My friends, we have—we have come to the end of a long journey. The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, *I had the honor* of calling Senator Barack Obama to congratulate him. Please. To *congratulate* him on being elected the next president of the country that we both love. In a contest as long and difficult as this campaign has been, *his success alone commands my respect for his ability and perseverance*. But that he managed to do so by *inspiring the hopes* of so many millions of Americans who had once wrongly believed that they had little at stake or little influence in the election of an American president is *something I deeply admire and commend him for achieving*.

The homage to the winner is actually *gracious*, but McCain also succeeds in drawing a picture of the President Elect which includes a crucial trait of his electoral message: hope. Moreover, he gives voice to a feature that had never been made explicit by Obama himself: the color of his skin. To McCain, “the election of an African-American to the presidency of the United States” is evident proof of a new American mentality, so that Obama’s achievement can be considered an achievement for the country as a whole. McCain includes a personal note of sympathy, mentioning his adversary’s grandmother, who has not lived long enough to see his success, but is certainly “in the presence of her Creator and so very proud of the good man she helped to raise”. Praise of the Other by McCain corresponds, in Obama’s speech, to a *modest* representation of the Self. If the failure is McCain’s failure, the victory is *not* Obama’s victory, but belongs to his supporters, the audience. McCain takes on the responsibility of defeat to preserve his audience (“the failure is mine, not yours”); Obama renounces the attribution of merit to endow his audience with it (“above all, I will never forget who this victory truly belongs to—it belongs to you. [...] This is your victory”). The prominence of the audience is also emphasized by Obama’s approach to the description of his future actions: his Presidency will be marked by his commitment to listen to the people and by the joint effort of all forces (actually, both supporters and adversaries) for the implementation of a common program.

These observations clearly show that the construction of *the ethos of the audience* is parallel in the two speeches, with obvious differences deriving from the two complementary contexts. McCain must curb the rage and the resentment of his supporters, reducing it to mere disappointment (“it is nat-

ural tonight to feel some disappointment”). The negative energies of the audience need to be transformed into a positive commitment to future action (“but tomorrow we must move beyond it [disappointment] and work together to get our country moving again”). Obama, on the other hand, must renew his campaign’s call to action: *let us* is the repeated exhortation. He calls for “a new spirit of patriotism, service and responsibility”, reaffirming the founding values of his program, with special attention for the *common* character of those values. The Democrats need “a measure of humility and determination to *heal the divides* that have held back our progress”. Modesty extends to the representation of the audience, where partisanship is a dangerous fault and shared values are the key to progress and unity. Obama explicitly addresses the Republicans, implying with a presupposition (*yet*) that complete unity is only a question of time:

And to those Americans whose support I have *yet* to earn—I may not have won your vote, but I *hear your voices*, I need your help, and I will be your President too.

Obama has actually heard McCain’s appeal:

I urge all Americans who supported me to join me in *not just congratulating* him [Obama], but *offering* our next president our good will and earnest effort to find ways to come together to find the necessary compromises to *bridge our differences* and help restore our prosperity, defend our security in a dangerous world, and leave our children and grandchildren a stronger, better country than we inherited.

These parallel representations of the audience both rely on a glorious image of America. “The promise and greatness of America” is condensed in a few words at the end of the cs: “Americans never quit. We never surrender. We never hide from history. We make history.”

In a much longer speech, Obama dwells on American history telling the story of a very old black woman who has just cast her vote. He uses an effective mechanism of double *mise en abîme*, looking at American achievements in the previous past century through the eyes of this old lady, and then wondering how today’s challenges would be judged from the point of view of present children, when—in the future—they get old. In this complex perspective, the campaign’s payoff (the famous *Yes, we can*) comes as a response to a call with a highly Biblical accent. In both speeches, America is the ultimate winner.

McCain’s *modest* though *political* self-representation, combined with his effort to reshape the image of his supporters in line with shared American val-

ues, paves the way for Obama’s focus on common action, which enables him to transform a winning party into a united nation.

## 5 Conclusion

In the perspective of a parallel between rhetoric and pragmatics, *ethos* and *face* can be considered partly overlapping concepts. From the point of view of rhetoric, *ethos* is the proof that makes the arguer trustworthy. But in the modern interpretation of the process of persuasion, where rhetoric meets discourse, *ethos* is the image of an enunciative responsibility—dialogic, interactional, argumentative, and situational.<sup>15</sup> *Ethos* is a general rhetoric principle, but shows local variation highly conditioned by context and genre (Antelmi 2011). As self-representation, co-constructed in interaction with the co-enunciator and mirroring representations of the other characters inscribed in (inter)discourse, it appears as the rhetorical counterpart of *face*, sharing important features of *face* as described in the *Introduction* and analyzed in other papers included in this volume.

The numerous examples taken from the genre analyzed for this investigation have shown how the images of Self and Other(s) are constructed in a highly institutionalized context, and how they support the viewpoint of the speaker, thus contributing to persuasion.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, the analysis of a case study has made it possible to examine the act of concession in the context of a macro-text, including the vs (also delivered in the Election Night) and, more in general, the US presidential campaign. In this wider perspective, interdiscursive correspondences emerge as further generic constraints, which are however loosely interpreted, with individual variations depending on the historical context and, ultimately, on the convictions and personality of the speakers. *Ethos*, after all, is *the character of the arguer*.

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15 These properties of discursive *ethos* consistently emerge from the numerous works devoted to the notion by Amossy (s., among others, Amossy 1999, 2001, 2010; Amossy and Orkibi 2021).

16 Actually, the CS (as the vs) does not belong to deliberation proper: according to the Aristotelian classification, it can be considered an epideictic speech, while in the pragmatic perspective it is a community-seeking activity type. Therefore, the argumentative line is rarely explicit, yet strongly embedded in the ritual performance of an important institutional action, through which the audience, America and the whole world are led to recognize and accept the election of a new US president.

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